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## OPINION **Political communication is achieving new levels of appalling toxicity**

"Assassination"... "knifing"... "killing zone"... The language being used is crass and intimidating

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When the BBC's former political editor Nick Robinson tweeted last week that people who you disagreed with weren't "enemies or traitors" and that they don't deserve to be "knifed or lynched or hanged" he was clearly passing comment on the current toxicity of political discourse.



**Nick Robinson**   
@bbcnickrobinson



Thought for the day : Those you disagree with aren't enemies or traitors. They don't deserve to be "knifed or lynched or hanged". They are just people you disagree with. Those who





The seemingly interminable wrangling over Brexit has polarised and divided opinion, and the way in which these opinions are being expressed, has, in some quarters, seen proponents on both sides resort to the language of violence and intimidation.

The Sunday Times of October 21 illustrated this perfectly. It's front page headline proclaimed, PM enters 'killing zone', whilst the adjoining report quoted an ally of former Brexit Secretary, David Davis, as saying: "assassination is in the air".

Further on in the paper, a full two-page feature devoted to the deficiencies of Mrs May ended with a quote from an unnamed former minister: "The moment is coming when the knife gets heated, stuck in her front and twisted. She'll be dead soon."


And, while it would be silly to suggest that the business of politics has ever been characterised by deference and good manners - one only has to consider the history of PM's Questions in the House of Commons for a reminder of how juvenile, base and degraded British democracy can be - the binary nature of the emotive Brexit debate has seen an increase in visceral and intimidatory language.

This talk of "knifing" and "assassinations" - though obviously meant in a metaphorical sense - is nonetheless crass and ill considered. We are only two years on from the appalling murder of Labour MP Jo Cox, who was shot and stabbed to death outside her own constituency headquarters.







 **Labour MP Jo Cox was killed by far-right activist Thomas Mair in her Batley and Spenningshall constituency** (Image: PA)


Thankfully, there has been some public condemnation. Robert Halfon, chairman of the Commons Education Committee told BBC Radio 4's World At One that the use of such language was shameful and that MPs shouldn't go around "aping the kind of extremist trolls on Twitter".

It's a pity that these sentiments are apparently not shared by Stewart Jackson, the former Tory MP who was David Davis' top adviser when he was Brexit secretary.

On the day of the People's Vote march a week ago, a man called Anthony Hopley posted on Twitter a picture of his hospitalised 12-year-old step son draped in a European Union flag bed cover. The accompanying message said: My stepson had an

operation yesterday @GreatOrmondSt. He's incredibly brave but gutted he can't be at the #PeoplesVoteMarch today with his brothers & sisters.



To which Mr Jackson replied: "What a pathetic cretin" 

It could be that we are, in the words of BBC media editor Amol Rajan, living through the utter collapse of manners and civility in our public domain - and social media appears to be to some extent significantly responsible.

And if we look across the pond to the leader of the free world we see a man whose success has been partially built on the daily utilisation of insult and violent language. From his routine misogyny (often women are animalised – most recently his former aide Omarosa Manigault Newman, was a “lowlife” and a “dog” and Stormy Daniels has been called “horse face”) to the regular attacks on the media.

As a matter of fact, in August experts at the United Nations, warned that Trump's vitriolic rhetoric could result in violence against journalists. And, as I write, news comes through of a number of explosive devices sent to Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and CNN's New York offices.

As CNN has responded, now the debate has begun (again): What role does violent political rhetoric have on these real-life acts of violence?

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## Rosa Parks in Doctor Who Series 11, as played by Vinette Robinson (Image: BBC)



As was the case with millions of others, I sat down with my family to watch the Dr Who episode dramatising the historic feats of US civil rights campaigner, Rosa Parks.

It was a work of remarkable poignancy which managed to tell Park's story dramatically and faithfully whilst at the same time remaining within the conventions of science fiction.

It is interesting, and perhaps significant, as journalist Dan Martin pointed out, that this was the first ever episode to be written by a person of colour (former children's laureate, Malorie Blackman co-wrote with Chris Chibnall) and only the eighth from a female writer.

Most notable in the episode was the way in which the racism of 1950s Alabama was portrayed. At times it wasn't an easy watch – the scenes on the bus where Parks was verbally abused were shocking to my eight and 10-year-olds. They simply couldn't understand why any human beings would judge another by the colour of their skin.

It had a life-affirming, uplifting ending and as so many people have said, you can imagine the episode being used in schools as a teaching aid.

### **Brilliant, Black and Welsh: A celebration of 100 African Caribbean and African Welsh people**

But anyone under the misapprehension that those days are completely consigned to the dustbin of history only had to look at the following days news to be quickly disabused of the notion. Footage taken from a mobile phone aboard a Ryanair flight from Barcelona to Stansted showed 77-year-old Delsie Gayle being subjected to the vilest of racial abuse before being moved from her seat at the request of her abuser.

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Rosa Parks died in 2005 on.

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\* Dr Jewell is director of Journalism.

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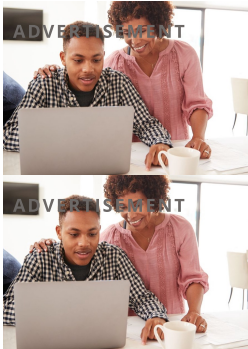
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